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Vincent S. Barraza

Jane Fiegel

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# Saving the black Catholic experience of Xavier University of Louisiana

by Vincent S Barraza and Jane L Fiegel

**Abstract:** The digital conversion and creation of accessible records from the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS) Oral History Collection includes recorded and transcribed interviews with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament who, in 1915, founded Xavier University of Louisiana (XULA) and continue to serve today. This article reflects on the beginnings of XULA and its unique place in Southern black history as the only Roman Catholic historically black college or university (HBCU) in the United States. It examines the necessity of archival oral history preservation at an African-American institution of higher education and the work archivists at Xavier University of Louisiana are doing now to help conserve rare primary research materials for the long-term preservation of black Catholic history.

**Keywords:** Black Catholics; archival preservation; Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament; Xavier University of Louisiana; racial segregation

Xavier University of Louisiana (XULA) is a private, four-year, co-educational historically black college or university (HBCU) located in New Orleans, Louisiana. It was founded in 1915 by Mother (now Saint)<sup>1</sup> Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS). The SBS is a Catholic order established by Mother Katharine Drexel in 1891, which remains active today. This order prioritised missionary work among marginalised people in the United States, notably African Americans, Native Americans and other racial minorities, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mother Katharine Drexel and her SBS founded many schools for children across the country between 1894 and 1927, and XULA was their first institution of higher education. In the early twentieth century, educational opportunities for African Americans in New Orleans were limited. The US Supreme Court had upheld *Plessy v Ferguson*, which confirmed the constitutional racial segregation of institutions in 1896, and Ruby Bridges would not

desegregate New Orleans public schools until 1960. Mother Katharine Drexel chose New Orleans for the site of a Catholic institution of higher education for African Americans which endures today as a respected university.

XULA serves as the oldest and only HBCU in the USA affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. The University had its beginnings in 1915 as a preparatory school. In 1917 it expanded to include a two-year normal school, which trained high school graduates to be teachers by educating them in the norms of pedagogy and curriculum. By 1922, the school was cited as the only Catholic institution in the United States that offered 'a full four years high school course for Colored boys'.<sup>2</sup> XULA would become a four-year college in 1925 after opening the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Due to rapid expansion in enrolment, the higher education campus was moved to its current location in the Gert Town neighbourhood of New Orleans in 1929. This location was and remains significant to



The new Xavier University administration building on the day of its dedication, 12 November 1932. Photo: Arthur P Bedou, XULA, Archives and Special Collections.

New Orleans residents. It was an industrial working-class neighbourhood that had begun to establish itself as an independent neighbourhood in the early 1900s when streetcars began to service the area better. XULA's move to this location further strengthened the community and provided stability for black Americans seeking educational opportunities. XULA's campus remains in this location today and continues to expand its footprint in the area.

The SBS served at and presided over the University until 1970 when the order abdicated control of the school to a board of trustees composed of both lay and religious members. Although the Sisters still remain a presence at the University, including teaching classes and holding religious consultation positions, the number of active Sisters serving at the University has declined over the last few decades. Today, the board of trustees continues to govern XULA, yet the histories and traditions of the Sisters live on among the students, faculty and staff.

### **XULA Archives and Sr Roberta Smith**

XULA Archives and Special Collections was officially founded in 1987 as the Archives and Special Collection for Black Studies.<sup>3</sup> Today, the Archives and Special

Collections continues to maintain and preserve a unique and diverse collection of manuscripts, records, photographs, ephemera and rare books. In support of XULA's mission 'to contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane society',<sup>4</sup> XULA's archival collections are in a wide range of formats with a focus on African Americans, black Catholics, New Orleans communities and Louisiana history. From its origins with the SBS and the Black Collection as its nucleus, the University always intended to create a centre for Black Studies that would rival anything else in the Deep South.<sup>5</sup> XULA's Archives continues to preserve the histories of XULA's founders and predominantly African-American student body, and XULA's continuously evolving history, by enabling digitisation programmes such as the digital conversion of the Charles F Heartman Manuscripts of Slavery Collection. Awarded an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Grant in 2015, the Archives became the catalyst for the creation of digitally accessible historical records, shining light into the long-forgotten collections held by XULA.

In early 2019, the Archives staff rediscovered an unlabelled archival box containing twenty-one tapes documenting oral history interviews conducted by Sr Roberta Smith in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Not



**Sister Roberta Smith, SBS, who served as Dean of Women, an admissions officer and co-founder of the Xavier Archives at Xavier University of Louisiana, undated. Photo: XULA, Archives and Special Collections (photographer unknown).**

long after, a small box of matching interview transcriptions surfaced, providing context and content to the recorded interviews. The cassette tapes were found to contain a previously unheard wealth of first-person narratives about the early history of the University, including the personal reflections of African-American students attending XULA from the 1910s to the 1950s, and interviews with SBS Sisters who served as some of the earliest faculty and directors of the University.

Under the leadership of Robert Skinner, former Dean of the Library, Sr Roberta began working there in 1986. It was at her insistence that Lester Sullivan, a noted researcher from the Amistad Research Center, helped her establish an official archive at XULA not to simply safeguard the rare materials, but to begin the collection of university records. Sr Roberta had apparently been trying for several years to interest university administrators in such a project but had not been successful.<sup>6</sup> In July 1987, with the partnership of Lester Sullivan, Sr Roberta officially co-founded the Library Archives and Special Collections.<sup>7</sup>

After years of working and organising the collections with the assistance of Sr Roberta, Lester Sullivan was awarded the post of University Archivist at XULA in October 1989.<sup>8</sup> Under his direction, the Archives and

Special Collections department implemented an oral history programme to record the history of the University in 'anticipation of the day when scholars will surely want to begin studying and writing about it'.<sup>9</sup> With Sr Roberta at the helm, this project began in the late 1980s by interviewing and recording other SBS and XULA alumni.

The recording process began as an oral history project because with so many living alumni and faculty from the earliest days of the University, oral history was the best preservation method to capture this unique history. In an internal library newsletter from 1989, Lester Sullivan noted that an oral history programme would 'capture these memories of earlier times here at Xavier and as well as within the Black New Orleans community'.<sup>10</sup> These interview sessions, although relaxed in nature, were well constructed and almost always carried the same line of questioning, creating a consistent record specific to the XULA alumni and faculty audience. With subjects ranging from impressions of XULA in its earliest years and the African-American experience, Sr Roberta was collecting some of the finest primary research of her time. As there was no project plan left behind or statement of purpose found with the tapes, it is unclear whether Sr Roberta



Students look on as cross-bearer Alvin J Aubry, class of 1937, leads the solemn procession at the library dedication ceremony, 16 October 1937. Photo: Arthur P Bedou, XULA, Archives and Special Collections.

had finished her project or had left it incomplete. It is also unclear why the tapes were stored without documentation. After almost forty years of dedicated service, Sr Roberta retired from the University in 1993, and eventually passed away in June 2006. Lester Sullivan would continue working as University Archivist until his retirement in 2012 and would pass away the following year. There appears to be no mention or record of the oral history project after 1993.

### Content/context of the oral histories

[...] and word came out, they didn't say the Sisters, they said, 'the Catholics' had bought the school [XULA] and Sister, when those white people around there – in that neighbourhood – and they were all white – those people stormed the building and broke every glass from the third floor down. Every window glass. I can remember that as a little child.

Edna St Cyr Williams, 1989<sup>11</sup>

Sr Roberta's twenty-one cassette tapes comprise interviews with nine members of the SBS who served and taught at XULA: Sr Evangeline, Sr Helena Jones SSF, Sr Lurana Neeley, Sr M Louis Nestler, Sr M Salvator and Sr Marie Christian, Sr Mary Columbiere, Sr Roland Legarde and Sr Mary Stanislaus Dalton. Also included are interviews with alumni from the early decades at XULA: Ora Mae Lewis Martin (1918-

2005), class of 1944; Isabelle Jackson Bailey and Edna St Cyr Williams (b. 1899); Lavinia Strong Lundy (1902-2011); Reverend Bartholomew Letory Sayles, OSB (1918-2006), who was a member of the Order of Saint Benedict and an alumnus from the class of 1939; and Joseph 'Joe' Spencer (1912-1990), who lived on the XULA campus and served in numerous custodial and housekeeping roles for sixty-one years, beginning at the age of fifteen in 1927 until his retirement in 1988. The collection also holds the transcripts for other interviews with Sr Marie Christine Gautier and Sr Valerie Riggs, which did not have any accompanying recorded cassette tapes. The tapes contain an abundance of previously unheard information and stories from the viewpoint of those who served on the front lines of the foundation of this historic black Catholic university. Almost all of the original interview subjects have passed away, underlining the importance of preserving and properly archiving these rare oral histories.

The content of the interviews ranges in scope. In one tape, Reverend Bartholomew Letory Sayles, OSB, conducts his own personal oral history, reflecting on his time as an African-American student at XULA and his post-graduation experiences as the third African American accepted into the community of Saint John's.<sup>12</sup> Interviews with alumni range from their personal experiences growing up as African Americans during segregation in New Orleans, their experiences at XULA



and how obtaining a higher education affected their futures. They also touched on the little-known interpersonal relationships between African Americans from different backgrounds. In one such interview, Edna St Cyr Williams remembers her experience in the 1920s studying with other African-American Catholic students who had come to XULA from neighbouring Mississippi:

I was fortunate. I was light skinned and I had this pretty curly hair, so I made it. But, that's the way that it was until it finally worked its way out. You know those girls, the Lidas, came from Pass Christian [Mississippi]. Sister, they were just as white as you and they were very prejudiced – those people in Pass Christian. They were very prejudiced; but we 'meld' together – finally.<sup>13</sup>

Interviews also reach into the historically significant black Catholic experience in New Orleans. One such reflection by Edna St Cyr Williams speaks directly to attending mass at St Stephen's Church, one of the oldest churches in the state of Louisiana:

Oh, yeah, you wouldn't dare go up front. And let me tell you – they had two rows of seats there and in the third seat – if there was one white person in the third seat, you couldn't go in it. And sometimes the usher would come and say, 'Would you mind moving up?' (referring to whites) and they'd say, 'No'. So, the blacks stood up in the back. The white person wouldn't move. Right there in the Church.<sup>14</sup>

Ora Mae Lewis Martin also discusses the New Orleanian black Catholic experience by recounting her time with a Sodality religious group (a charitable association for the laity in the Roman Catholic Church) going from door to door asking for donations for the upcoming Eucharistic Congress. Ora Mae Lewis Martin remembers one woman in particular who refused to donate, and her reason: 'I would be glad to donate to it she said but I think it's time that Bishop whoever he is should make it known what part us colored people are gonna play in it and let us know whether we gonna get insulted again the way we were at that St. Joseph's church the last time they had an activity citywide'.<sup>15</sup> She remembers the woman saying to her, '[Y]ou go back and ask him whether we gonna be trailing behind the white folks or whether we gonna be treated as if we are Christians on an equal basis with everybody else'.<sup>16</sup> Martin did just that: she wrote a letter to Archbishop Joseph Rummel detailing the community's concerns. When an unsatisfactory response was given on the Archbishop's behalf, the situation eventually made it into one of the city's newspapers. She remembers that Archbishop Rummel personally called her after publication and invited her to his office for a meeting; they would meet many times after that and develop a close relationship. It is these little-known experiences that lend exponential weight to the cultural

and historic value of the interview collection and its contents.

For interviews with other SBS, Sr Roberta guides reflection on their first impressions of the Sisterhood, their arrival and tenures at XULA, emotions regarding the changing tides of the black communities during the impact of the early civil rights movement in New Orleans, impressions of Mother Katharine Drexel during her University visits and, occasionally, glimpses of their lives beyond the school grounds.

Of special note, Sr M Evangeline reflects on the importance of black education and the socio-economic challenges African Americans faced not only while attending XULA in the 1940s, but post-graduation.

Now, to come to our own Catholic Blacks – they are realising now the work of Xavier University that they have standing – it has academic standing and they have their social life and that they are upper middle class and they are refined; they are cultured people; they are intellectual; and they are intellectual readers [...] Black people are beginning to realise the worth of what they have.<sup>17</sup>

It is quotations like this that emphasise the significance of preserving and sharing these experiences at an archive located at an HBCU, especially the oldest such institution of Roman Catholic heritage.

Accompanying interviews continue by offering a rare look into the daily life of African-American students in the South, from the point of view of the Sisters. In one such instance, Sr Evangeline reflects on how the police treated calls from African Americans versus the white Sisters:

This was just when school was starting and he brought his daughter in (to the XULA dormitory), and I said [...] 'We'd better call the police'. So the Black man said he would call. The police wouldn't even listen to him, so I said (to the police), 'This is a Sister [Evangeline] from Xavier. I am in the women's dormitory and there is a strange man all dressed in white walking up the street, like as if he had escaped from somewhere'. They said, 'Oh, we have been looking for that man'. I said, 'But you wouldn't even listen to the Black man that you were talking to?! Now please get up here and take care of that man'.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, Sr Roberta was comprehensive in her questions, pulling a great deal of information out of the interviewees and building a rich collection of considerable historical value. This collection of oral history interviews is hosted through the XULA Digital Archives, and some of them include handwritten or typed transcripts by Sr Roberta.

### **The importance of oral histories in an HBCU archive**

Sr Roberta's oral history project in the Archives was an important new initiative at XULA during its time, but



A living rosary at Xavier University of Louisiana, October 1940. Photo: XULA, Archives and Special Collections (photographer unknown).

it was also part of a larger trend. Since at least 1948, with the creation of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, oral history has made its way into archives and libraries.<sup>19</sup> The 1970s and 1980s saw an increase in the use of oral history, spurred on in part by funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and these decades also saw articles discussing the value and appropriateness of the practice in the archival and librarian professions.<sup>20</sup> Oral history's existence in archives and libraries has persisted for decades and its role continues to be renegotiated. Interviews have been used to augment existing collections and expand the scholarship of a subject by incorporating new voices and experiences into official records.<sup>21</sup> While they can often be thought of as impartial record-keepers, archivists can take a more active role through the creation of these interviews, just as Sr Roberta did.

Oral history has been utilised to expand and diversify sources of historical information.<sup>22</sup> Interviews provide an avenue for individuals to make their stories and voices part of the historical record. Institutional oral histories, like the ones conducted for the Oral History Project at XULA, are part of officially sanctioned writings, but they also present an opportunity for interviewees to add their personal experiences and history to the annals of the University.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, oral histories that focus on centring the voices of marginalised groups record histories that are not often documented.<sup>24</sup> The Oral History Project at XULA builds on

this precedent by seeking the voices of the earliest staff and students as part of a larger documentation of the lives of African Americans in New Orleans in the early twentieth century. Interviewers not only make these histories available to researchers, but they preserve experiences that tend to be erased from official narratives. Oral history interviews create an opportunity for the interviewees to engage with scholarship by adding their experiences to historical narratives and broadening existing research. The voices of former students and faculty create a broader understanding of the inner workings of XULA and the Sisters.

The bulk of XULA history in the Archives comprises official university documents, such as organisational minutes, department records, course catalogues and memos. While undoubtedly important and necessary to have, these documents do not tell the whole story of XULA. They make up the foundational structural history of the University, but the stories and knowledge of university workers and former students, the people who helped shape XULA, are not a part of this official narrative. XULA's history cannot be told fully through minutes and memos. Oral history, however, can fill in the gaps these records leave behind.<sup>25</sup> Archivists, in particular, are uniquely equipped to identify and remedy these gaps in collections.<sup>26</sup> They are the most familiar with the collections in their care, meaning they can best point to weaknesses in these collections and know what information could be added to strengthen them. Conducting oral history interviews is one way for



**Pilgrimage from Xavier University of Louisiana to the Our Lady of Prompt Succor Shrine. Around 300 Xavierites (faculty, students and Sisters) participated in the Sodality-sponsored pilgrimage, c 1954. Photo: Nolan A Marshall, XULA, Archives and Special Collections.**

archivists actively to improve these ‘scholarship gaps’.<sup>27</sup> Through these interviews, archivists can address missing pieces of history and allow new voices to be heard.

Sr Roberta knew of the gaps surrounding XULA’s history and the history of the SBS and sought to rectify them. During many interviews, Sr Roberta would ask questions such as, ‘[do you] know what that [building] was for?’<sup>28</sup> and ‘[w]ould you have any idea why they would drop Home Economics and Industrial Arts?’<sup>29</sup> Certain specific aspects of the history of the University were not well preserved, well known or easily accessible to those who had questions. Sr Roberta was able to clarify pieces of information by directly asking those who lived and worked through those changes and time periods, adding their responses to XULA’s record.

By interviewing Sisters, alumni and other staff, and archiving the tapes and transcripts, Sr Roberta ensured that their stories would be preserved. Their accounts of life at XULA and their religious journeys have become part of the recorded history of both XULA and SBS. While these recorded oral history interviews by no means replace official documents, manuscripts and biographies, they are legitimate primary sources that diversify and widen the scope of historical information.<sup>30</sup>

This is particularly important for marginalised and less documented groups, such as black/African-American Catholics. Statistically, African Americans in the United States identify predominantly as Christian, at roughly seventy-nine per cent, yet Catholics only make

up about five per cent of that community, with the majority identifying as Baptist.<sup>31</sup> Oral histories of these groups hope to preserve their lived experiences and add them to the historical record as valid sources. By recording the histories of a variety of people from numerous different backgrounds, and storing them at an HBCU, the interviews Sr Roberta conducted protect these unique experiences from being erased or forgotten. Each alumnus and staff interview has the potential to uncover a new facet of XULA or SBS history, and can offer insights into areas such as religion, race, politics and gender.

Religious oral histories, in particular, provide insight into an often private world. Tracey E K Meyer states that ‘[b]y encouraging interviewees to reflect on their beliefs and motivations, scholars can explore the nature of personal faith, the connection between faith and behaviour and the role of religion in historical events’.<sup>32</sup> These histories allow researchers the opportunity to study how people’s religious faith and convictions can influence not only the trajectory of their lives, but also major events and movements. Faith can be a catalyst for public action, and oral histories can highlight this connection.<sup>33</sup> SBS is an order founded on the cause of social justice and the Sisters have historically aided the fight for racial equality and desegregation. Their interviews offer researchers a better understanding of how faith impacted their decisions to support these causes. SBS oral histories can also explore Sisters’ personal calls to join the order, which can have broader implica-



tions in the realm of gender and familial politics. For example, Paul Gerrard interviewed over forty Sisters from the Poor Clare Order and found 'that none of the sisters entered the Poor Clares for negative reasons; that is, they were not leaving something behind', which contradicts the stereotypical view that nuns are forced into service by their family or by some other power.<sup>34</sup> These Sisters, much like some of the Sisters interviewed in XULA's Oral History Project, were joining their orders in direct defiance of the desires of their families. The interviews reveal information that diverges from traditional narratives and assumptions, which gives researchers a more nuanced view of the topics they are pursuing.

Sr Roberta's tapes offer a unique view into multiple topics of interest that would be relevant to researchers who are not specifically studying religion. David A Huary noted several non-religious subject areas that can be pulled out of religious archives;<sup>35</sup> the Oral History Project's religious oral histories offer the same tangential benefits. They touch on subject matters such as institutional history, business and employment, social justice, education and New Orleanian history, to name only a few. For example, Ora Mae Lewis Martin, in her interview, discusses her time making aeroplane radios at a war production plant during the Second World War, and Sr Marie Christine Gautier details much of the history of the now-defunct librarian certification programme that XULA sponsored in the University's first few decades.<sup>36</sup> The aforementioned topics are also discussed in the intersections of race and gender, as many of the interviewees are women and black/African Americans who lived through the Jim Crow and civil rights eras. Sr Roberta's interviews hold relevance outside religious scholarship, and their continued preservation would benefit researchers from a multitude of fields, not just those relating to black/African-American Catholic studies.

### The necessity of digitisation and preservation

The steady institutional expansion of the American church, especially during the twentieth century, had resulted in the creation of vast amounts of archival material, but attention to it was scattered and isolated.

James M O'Toole, *Diocesan Archives*, 1998<sup>37</sup>

Just as the SBS left its mark across the nation in the bricks and mortar of churches, schools, hospitals and social welfare institutions, it also left a less apparent legacy of paper, film and other recorded information. As noted by author James O'Toole, 'Archival materials are rarely created deliberately with an eye toward providing the primary sources from which later historians will reconstruct the story of a church or other institution; rather, archival records in a variety of formats are created in the process of historical actors doing what they do and leaving traces behind for their own future reference and use'.<sup>38</sup> This can be seen

especially with the interviews conducted by Sr Roberta and the lack of accompanying documentation to the project. The life cycle of records is understood and referenced by historians and archivists alike. Documentation passes from active use to occasional use, and records eventually reach a point at which some are destroyed and others are committed to the permanent care of the archives.<sup>39</sup> For example, XULA Archives and Special Collections holds numerous manuscripts, photographs and ephemera relating directly to black Catholics in New Orleans which are in the final stages of their life cycle. Other diocesan archival programmes have done a fantastic job of caring for the historically valuable records at the end of this life cycle by ensuring their collections are actively being used and that sufficient funding is reserved for their preservation. However, only a select few, like the projects undertaken by XULA, designed to rediscover and re-invigorate collection accessibility, have undertaken the detailed and systematic planning required to connect those efforts with the problems of present-day diocesan record-keeping. To this end, many aspects of records management work are distinctly unglamorous, such as spending countless hours scanning manuscripts and photographs by hand.<sup>40</sup> This work becomes less likely to be funded by administrations and donors due to its unappealing labour costs. It is this work that archival programmes in universities strive to justify and undertake as a service, not only to the university but to the community at large.

As with any collection of historically relevant materials, accessible digital libraries created from these items also need to distinguish themselves from mere collections or databases of things. As expressed by Chern Li Liewa, 'They [archives] are expected to add value to their resources, and the added value may consist of establishing context around the resources, enriching them with new information and relationships that express the usage patterns and knowledge of the community concerned, in that the digital library becomes a context for collaboration and information accumulation rather than simply a place to find and access information'.<sup>41</sup> In order for XULA to create this value, reach its goal of becoming an accessible digital library and best serve the University, projects like the oral history project work to bring these physical archival materials out. By re-engaging with the historic archive collections, for example XULA's cassette tapes, the life cycle becomes lengthened. The XULA Archives hold hundreds of unidentified photographs from the earliest years on the XULA campus and these photos provide a glimpse into the lives of the Sisters, African-American students and faculty's daily lives on the campus. They also provide a look into the yearly Catholic celebrations led by the Sisters on campus. Digitally preserving these photos and creating accessible resources for their use may shine light into Church organisations or observances, such as feast day celebrations for the Sisters and the schoolwide May Crowning events. As expressed by Cyprian Davis, 'It may very well be that black Catholics

were similar to white Catholics in the veneration of Mary, the practice of the Rosary, the practice of novenas, etc.’.<sup>42</sup> Re-evaluating, maintaining and conserving XULA’s collections becomes paramount for these potentially lost events. It is within these Holy Week observances, and the African folk traditions that have survived in the rural areas of the South, such as Louisiana, that the individuality of the black Catholic religious experience, especially in a religious institution for black higher education, is evident.<sup>43</sup>

As time continues to push on, historical records, like those held in the XULA Archives, eventually lose their practical usefulness and assume instead a usefulness as historical evidence of the place of the Church in the changing social dynamic of American society, especially in the South.<sup>44</sup> These records serve as a catalyst for understanding the black Catholic experience at XULA. Changes in the archives profession, including lively discussion of new approaches to appraisal (the process by which archivists decide which records have sufficient long-term value to warrant their retention in the archives) and the application of various sorts of automated technology to the management of archival collections, demand that all archivists work regularly to ensure that their own professional knowledge and abilities remain up to date.<sup>45</sup> It is the intention of the XULA Archives, and its archivists, to continue to implement new technologies and applications to digitise, preserve and lead new projects so that the histories of African-American Catholics in the South may persist.

### **The FYRE Program and the SBS Oral History Project**

Even with the recently uncovered cassette tape interviews, there remains an acute lack of primary research materials on the personal history and vocation of the SBS relating directly to the African-American students and parishioners at XULA. As the years continue, there are a dwindling number of SBS Sisters still alive and of sound mind participating in the order’s mission of scholarly expansion and active instruction at XULA. During peak years of activity, there were more than 600 Sisters serving around the United States, yet by 2018 that number had declined to roughly 100, more than half of whom were retired from service. In 2018, Sheila King, spokesperson for the congregation, said that the approximately four dozen Sisters who lived in the motherhouse in Bensalem, PA, had moved to a senior living facility, and that some of the congregation’s archives had been entrusted to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.<sup>46</sup> At the time of writing there are no digital or video oral histories relating directly to the Sisters who served at XULA held at the Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, where the main SBS Archival Collection is housed. Alongside this lack of visual and audio history, hundreds of unidentified and partially identified images of the SBS are presently held in the Xavier Archives and Special Collections, dating back to the founding and early years of the University.



**Portrait of Sister Juliana Haynes, SBS, undated. Photo: XULA, Archives and Special Collections (photographer unknown).**

In 2015, XULA’s Archives implemented a digital asset management system which serves as an open repository for historical manuscripts, photographs and university records. The XULA library has devoted the last few years to crafting, promoting and modernising the Digital Archives in the hope of protecting black Catholic histories by leading the SBS Oral History Project. Just as Sr Roberta took the reins in the 1980s, the library strives to save the memories, accounts and experiences of the SBS who led the University to its present well-respected reputation. The project was intended to research, interview and archive oral histories from the remaining Sisters, and those closely associated with XULA, in the hope of preserving the little-known, or completely unknown, history of the University for those who lived, worked and toiled for equality in African-American education.

In 2019, XULA was selected for the Summer Research-Early Identification Program (SR-EIP). SR-EIP is a fully paid summer internship that provides undergraduates with training and mentoring in the principles underlying the conduct of research. This internship includes a programme called the First Year Research Experience (FYRE), which provides research opportunities for students who have just completed their first year at a minority-serving partner institution. As one of the projects for this programme, under the leadership of the Digital Preservation Librarian, the SBS Oral History Project charged four students from the FYRE Summer Program with not only learning



Sister Juliana Haynes, SBS, (right) speaks with Nancy Hampton (left) during the FYRE Program oral history interviews, 11 June 2019. Photo: Vincent Barraza, XULA, Archives and Special Collections.

about historical archival collections, including collection organisation and management, but also undertaking hands-on training and interviewing sessions with the SBS. Over the course of two weeks in summer 2019, four African-American undergraduate students were trained to use digital camera equipment, sound-recording devices and interviewing techniques for oral-history-related projects.

Alongside this training, the Digital Preservation Librarian invited two SBS (Sr Juliana Haynes and Sr Mary Ann Stachow) to sit down with the librarians and FYRE Program students to be interviewed about their experiences in the Sisterhood, as well as their experiences during their service at XULA. Sr Mary Ann Stachow professed her faith to the Sisterhood and officially became a Sister of the Blessed Sacrament in 1962. She attended XULA from 1965 to 1967, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education. Sr Stachow returned to XULA in 1981 and has taught Theology and Biblical History courses. Sr Juliana Haynes came to XULA in 1971, taking a position on the board of trustees. She served on the board from 1971 to 1990, and again from 2004 to 2010, holding the position of Vice-Chair Lady from 1985 to 1990. Sr Juliana has long experience of working with and in the Xavier Music Department, beginning with

her position as Head of the Junior School of Music and assisting Sr Mary Elise Sisson SBS (1897-1982), foundress of 'Opera Ebony'. In 2010 Sr Juliana was re-assigned to the Xavier Music Department, and besides teaching and assisting the Chair, she has spent her tenure rebuilding the Junior School of Music, which has not yet come back from the Hurricane Katrina devastation.

Over the course of two days, both Sr Juliana and Sr Stachow were provided the opportunity to ruminate on their time pre-Sisterhood, their tenure at XULA, their experiences with racism and segregation, and their current involvement in the University community. FYRE Program students were guided by the Digital Preservation Librarian and accompanying archivists in setting up the interview spaces, leading the interviews with the Sisters, running the camera and sound equipment and listening in on interviews as they were being conducted. Both Sisters, generous with their time, spoke with the group for nearly twelve combined hours. This primary research exercise afforded the FYRE students the chance to hear first-person narratives of XULA history, and understand the processes and worth of oral histories and the necessity of long-term preservation in archives. In a post-programme assessment survey, FYRE students said they were 'appreciative of

the historic experiential activities' and had 'gained skills to help become a good researcher'. Once the interviews were completed, the digital files were converted and backed-up for permanent preservation. The editing and public posting of the interviews into the Digital Archives is currently in process, but the digital files still remain available for researchers' use in the XULA Archives and Special Collections.

Renewing the goals of Sr Roberta, the SBS Oral History Project not only dynamically engages with presently serving SBS, but also digitally conserves the oral histories for participation in XULA's storied history. These accessible recordings, made in both the 1980s and 2019, now offer scholars open access to never-before-heard or -seen material relating directly to XULA, African-American experiences in New Orleans, and the black Catholic experience, inspiring re-examination of the University's resources and digital archives.

## Conclusion

With the expansion of the internet and with research accessibility at an all-time high, the situation could be best summed up by Cyprian Davis:

Today the invisible element in American Catholic history has now become visible. In the social context before the Civil War and after, the presence of blacks is now much larger than hitherto believed [...] New questions and new directions will enable us to penetrate the shadows and give depth to new perceptions.<sup>47</sup>

As previously shown, these innovative projects undertaken by XULA Archives and Special Collections aim to deliver new observations on the history of the Sisters and their vocation to the University by utilising oral histories to provide a deeper understanding of the past and why social change must continue into the future. By creating a well-rounded narrative, using these unique primary resources, coupled with the collections being housed at a historically black and Catholic university, students and researchers can better

appreciate the cultural value held in these interviews.

Alongside the perpetual archival work undertaken by XULA, additional diocesan archivists must also continue to construct professional bridges to Church historians and other patrons of their collections. As James O'Toole emphasised,

Most contemporary archivists, no matter what kind of organisation they work for, have come to see that the use which their collections receive is the underlying justification for everything they do. Preservation of records for its own sake is no longer (if it ever was) an adequate justification for the investment of archival time, treasure, and effort. Archivists do everything they do so that someone – a whole range of someones, in fact – will use their collections for all kinds of different research.<sup>48</sup>

It has been shown that the goal of XULA's Archives and Special Collection is to underline the potential of these newly rediscovered and re-imagined oral history projects by generating comprehensive and accessible records for research and discovery. It has also become necessary to re-engage with the history of the SBS to better address and adjust to contemporary African-American communities.

Just as Sr Roberta Smith led the oral history programme during the beginnings of the Xavier Archives and Special Collections department, XULA continues to use inclusive programmes to drive the examination and preservation of history. As black Catholic institutions like XULA move forward into new generations, it has become increasingly necessary to revisit, rediscover, conduct and preserve the oral narratives from those who lived through some of the most tumultuous times in Southern US history. Religious organisations like the SBS have watched their membership dwindle over the years and their oldest members with institutional knowledge are beginning to pass on. Not only is it becoming more apparent that these reflections must be preserved, but by conducting new oral history interviews and creating accessible research, the history and preservation of African-American history will endure.

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Addresses for correspondence:  
Vbarraza@xula.edu  
Jfiegel@xula.edu